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ABSTRACT

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are not achieving the levels of English literacy required for satisfactory completion of Australia's school system. A national strategy has been launched to help Indigenous students achieve English literacy. However, there continues to be little recognition of the language and cultural needs of the many Indigenous Aboriginal students who speak "Aboriginal English." A survey of 110 Australian teachers found that 8 felt they were competent to teach Aboriginal students. Five major principles are involved in teaching Standard Australian English to Indigenous students. First, a child's mother tongue embodies all his or her early life experiences and ingrained language habits. It allows the child to communicate and function comfortably and channels his or her thought processes prior to starting school. Second, school should be an extension of early childhood experience: there should not be a sharp break between early childhood language experiences and language experiences at school. Third, teaching is most effective when there is no conflict between home and school. Conflict can be avoided if schools respect every child's mother tongue. No language should be branded as inferior. Fourth, schooling can be effective only when the teacher and child listen to and understand one another. Finally every Aboriginal child, as well as every other Australian child, needs to be given optimal opportunities for developing competence in Standard Australian English, which is the medium of higher education and official communication in Australia. (TD)

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ED 475 372

Englishes and Literacies: Indigenous Australian Contexts

(Presentation to the ACTA/QATESOL Conference, Brisbane, 6 July 2000, by Penny Tripcony, Manager, Oodgeroo Unit, Queensland University of Technology.)

Abstract

In recent years, in response to calls for improved competencies and english literacy skills within the current and future workforce, Australian governments have directed that overall literacy benchmarks be set by annual testing of school students, with a view to ascertain targets for remedial action. Where does this testing place those students whose home languages are either not english, or the form of english recognised by education systems and subsequent employers?

It is often expected that particular attention should be given to students who were (or whose parents were) born in non-english-speaking countries or, in the case of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, those who live in remote communities. However, there continues to be little recognition of the language and cultural needs of the many Indigenous Australian students who attend urban and rural schools and who are speakers of the various forms of english which have come to be known as 'Aboriginal english'.

This presentation, based on experiences from community education programs, schools, vocational education and tertiary systems, focuses on Indigenous Australians – who they are; and their use of english language in both oral and written forms. In addition, some pointers are offered for educators working with Indigenous Australian students, their parents and communities.

Introduction

Annual testing has shown that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students generally are not achieving levels of english literacy competence required for satisfactorily completing the twelve years of schooling, and successfully pursuing a range of post-school education and employment options. This presentation attempts to demonstrate:

- that englishes spoken by Indigenous Australians today are linked with traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, Aboriginal Kriols and Torres Strait Creole; and
- that second language teaching techniques are more appropriate than literacy teaching methods to guide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners towards the achievement of english literacy competence comparable with the remainder of the student population.

The National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy

In March this year the Prime Minister, together with the Federal Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs launched the *National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, 2000-2004*.

The strategy's objective is:

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> *To achieve English literacy, numeracy and attendance outcomes for indigenous students at levels comparable to those achieved by other Australians.*

The strategy is, of course, aligned with other national directions. For example, those outlined in the:

- *National Goals for Schooling in Australia in the Twenty-First Century;*
- *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy;* and
- *National Literacy and Numeracy Goals,* especially

> *...that every child leaving primary school should be numerate, and able to read, write and spell at an appropriate level...*

and that:

> *..every child commencing school from 1998 will achieve a minimum acceptable literacy and numeracy standard within four years.*

The six key elements of the strategy are:

1. Achieving attendance
2. Overcoming hearing, health and nutrition problems
3. Preschooling experiences
4. Getting good teachers
5. Using the best teaching methods
6. Measuring success, achieving accountability

Why such a strategy?

The development of education policies, programs and strategies for specific social groups is not new. During the 1980s and 1990s we witnessed, firstly, the promotion of multiculturalism, which evolved into groups defined as, women and girls, and low socio-economic, migrant and multicultural, rural and isolated, disabled, gifted and talented and Aboriginal students; each of whom were targeted for the purpose of achieving equitable educational outcomes.

More recently, the introduction of literacy and numeracy testing has demonstrated serious gaps in the competency levels of groups students. This is particularly so for Indigenous Australian students whose results for those tests are considerably lower than those of other students.

It is not only politicians and educators who find this situation unacceptable: it is also Indigenous parents, who want their children to be competent in standard english language and literacy. Indigenous students, too, want to have the same educational and employment opportunities as other students.

Why is it that Indigenous Australian students are not achieving English language and literacy competencies?

I believe that the development of english language competency by Indigenous Australian students requires appropriate teacher education on Indigenous Australian cultures,

identity, worldviews and language use; and, in the classroom, second language approaches to teaching. This I hope to demonstrate by presenting a brief background to traditional languages and current english language use by Indigenous people. In so doing, I draw heavily upon the work of Dr Diana Eades, who has researched and worked closely with Indigenous people in Queensland for many years; and of Professor Ian Malcolm and colleagues in Western Australia.

Who are Indigenous students?

First, however, teachers must be able to recognise Indigenous students, accept their Indigenous identity and the background and life experiences that they bring with them to the classroom.

Remote, tradition-oriented communities are distinct. Teachers taking up appointments in these areas expect to be teaching Indigenous students, and also expect that there will be differences in cultures and language use. But what of those Indigenous students in urban and rural settings? What are teachers' expectations of Indigenous students who appear to have similar family structures and lifestyles as Anglo-Australians, and who use English language to communicate?

The formal Commonwealth government definition of an Indigenous Australian has three parts:

a) a person who is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent;
b) who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; and
c) is accepted as such within their respective Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community.

This definition has been the basis of government policy relating to Indigenous people since the 1967 Constitutional referendum, and formalised by the High Court in 1983. It contains no reference to physical appearance or to geographic location or lifestyle. Yet, in educational settings we continue to hear statements such as, "They <u>say</u> they're Aboriginal, but they don't look it."; and "They're not <u>really</u> Aboriginal - they live in a nice house; the parents have good jobs and drive cars; they're just the same as any suburban family." ; and " It's only the ones in the desert and the north who are the true Aborigines (or Torres Strait Islanders).".

> *To define 'really Aboriginal' in terms of physical features, such as skin colour, or adherence to traditional practices, is inaccurate. It can also be grossly unjust. Perhaps one of the most basic and at the same time the most crucial, problems in the delivery of education, health services, and justice to many Aboriginal people today is the failure of many Australians, including those in professions, to recognise the former's rightful claim to Aboriginality, and the cultural and linguistic differences which are involved.* (Eades, 1992:7.)

It is often assumed that Indigenous people whose lifestyle is perceived to be the same as non-Indigenous Australians and who no longer speak traditional languages, must have 'lost their culture'.

There are numerous academic discussions on the concept of culture. In an unpublished paper titled *"What is this thing called 'Culture'"*, Groome (1996:4), refers to many of these discussions and how they might relate to Aboriginal education. He writes,

> *Faced with the evidence of the destructive effects of traditional understandings of the word 'culture' many theorists over the last decade have advocated new interpretations of the term. There is now a range of concepts being discussed. All of these share one aspect in common. They have sought to move away from the concept of culture as a fixed entity, a complex of 'concrete behaviour patterns, customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters'. (Geertz 1973:87) Instead they have sought to stress the role of individuals over and above that of groups in forming patterns of personal cultures.*

Thus, culture is seen as a construct, which is neither fixed nor measurable, but dynamic: "*...a living organism that is continually being constructed by individuals in the course of their day to day living.*" (Groome, 1996:5)

There is not now, nor has there ever been, such things as <u>the</u> Aboriginal culture, or <u>the</u> Torres Strait culture. Yet lists of Aboriginal learning styles or Aboriginal behaviours continue to be made available to teachers. Such lists are problematic, in that they reinforce what is termed "essentialism", a notion which seeks to reduce Aboriginality to a few "essentials" or basic descriptors, usually based on traditional values. The lists are often then interpreted into practice as one of two approaches to teaching Indigenous students. Both approaches are dangerous. One approach denies urban Indigenous students any claims to having a characteristic identity; and the other approach proposes a generic Aboriginal culture or Torres Strait culture that anticipates certain behaviours of students. Both approaches result in Indigenous students being stereotyped and lumped together. Thus schooling becomes a disempowering process that hampers students' potential to learn and progress through their years of formal education. <u>All</u> students need to be accepted as individuals, and provided with educational opportunities accordingly.

However, Eades (1992:10) emphasises that *Regardless of differences in lifestyle and socio-economic situation, Aboriginal people in Australia today belong to overlapping kin-based networks sharing social life, responsibilities and rights, a common history and culture and experience of racism and ethnic consciousness.*

Why is English literacy a problem for Indigenous students?

At the time of British settlement, it is estimated that there were around 250 language groups, each with sub-groups or dialects, thus a total of around 600 languages spoken. *While these languages were related, they were separate languages; in the same way that Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and English today are four related but separate languages. Many of these languages had one or more dialects which were mutually intelligible with*

each other – that is, speakers of one dialect could understand speakers of another, as for example with Scottish English and Australian English today. (Ibid., p.15.)

Languages were fully developed, with large vocabularies and complex grammars, as elaborate as those of Latin and ancient Greek. For example, the Guugu Yimithirr language of Cooktown had 11 cases, formed by adding different endings to nouns and pronouns, like the cases of Latin. (Ibid., p.15.).

Today most Aboriginal Australians speak Aboriginal englishes their first language. These are dialects of english that reflect, maintain and continually create Aboriginal cultures and identities. Eades estimates that in Queensland alone, at least 93% of Aboriginal people use english, but the language used is not Standard english; rather, distinctly Aboriginal dialects of english. *These dialects are often classified along a continuum, ranging from light to heavy. Light forms of Aboriginal English are very close to SAE. Heavy versions are closer to Kriol and are spoken in remote areas.* (DEET [undated] p.13)

Torres Strait Islander languages

Currently in the Torres Strait, there are two major language groups -

a) Western Language (*Kala Lagaw Ya*), and
b) Eastern Language (*Meriam Mir*).

In the latter half of the twentieth century this language, *Torres Strait Creole* (also known as *Broken*, *Pizin*, or *Blaikman*) developed. It is now the common language, spoken by approximately 3,000 Torres Strait Islanders as a first language and up to 12,000-15,000 as a second language.

Anna Schnukal's work, *Broken – An Introduction to the Creole Language of the Torres Strait Islands* (Pacific Linguistics, Series C, No 107, Canberra) provides further information on the linguistic features of Torres Strait Creole.

Aboriginal Kriol

There are also Aboriginal Kriols spoken widely throughout northern Australia (mainly in the Northern Territory). These are not dialects of English. People who speak Kriol often do not speak Aboriginal English, thus requiring interpreters to communicate effectively with speakers of Standard English. (For information on the linguistic features of Kriol, see 'A sketch on the structure of Kriol' by John Sandefur in *Language in Australia*, edited by Suzanne Romaine, Cambridge University Press 1991, pp 204-212.)

Literacy: an Indigenous view

Kaye Price (1990) described literacy as a common form of art and ideas. While in modern mainstream Australia, literate societies are considered to be those which preserve and develop their history and culture in written form, Price perceives 'traditional' Aboriginal literacy as the enshrining of history, heritage and cultures in paintings on bark, on bodies, on cave walls, and in sand, as well as in dance and song: a literacy that was privileged information depending on one's wisdom or maturity. Although many

researchers have reported that traditionally Australian Aborigines did not write their languages, Jennifer Biddle (1996) supports Price's assertion, adding a comment from Jimmy Jampijimpa Robertson (1990):

> *When some other Yapa community come and have a look at your painting there, they just talk that one, they read that one. They know which way it started and where it finished and which one is sacred site. Same as paper again. Kardiya (European, non-Aboriginal, whitefella) can't read it. No. (Laughing) They got to look that paper. They got to read from a book, not from a painting.*

This comment demonstrates the different ways of being in the world, and helps us to see that for each of us, our literacy abilities depend very much upon how we have been socialised at home, our experiences outside of the home, and the context in which we are expected to use our skills of reading, viewing, listening, comprehending, analysing, verbalising, writing, etc.

Another form of literacy is 'reading' non-verbal language – a traditional skill passed on through generations and frequently used by Indigenous Australians today. (Enemburu, 1989.)

Differences between Aboriginal english and Standard Australian english

> *Standard Australian english is a derivative of Standard english, itself a derivative of an English dialect used in some parts of London and south-east England. It is one dialectal form of a language among many others, that is used by those in power. The question of what becomes a 'standard' language is often more a matter of politics and relative power than it is of linguistics.* (DEET [undated], p.14.)

In some areas – particularly the Northern Territory, Western Australia, northern South Australia and far north Queensland – where traditional languages are in continued use by both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, english is obviously a second (or third, or fourth, etc) language, requiring second language teaching techniques for english literacy acquisition. Not so obvious is the need for second language teaching of Indigenous Australian students whose daily communication is in a form of Aboriginal english.

The differences between Aboriginal englishes and Standard Australian english are found in every area of language:

Pronunciation
Grammar
Vocabulary
Meaning
Use and style.

It is not only the structure and vocabulary of Aboriginal englishes that are perceived to be problematic, but (as with all languages) the less obvious values embedded in them. When

Standard Australian english (SAe) is the language of instruction for all areas of curriculum and skills development, there are serious implications for both teachers and Indigenous learners.

> *Aboriginal english can be described as the 'home language'... It is the language of their home, family and community and it is through their language that many Aboriginal children will learn about most of the more important aspects of life, especially their Aboriginality.* (NSW Department of School Education, 1989)

Links between english literacy competence and employment?

The message implicit in policies developed for all learners is that literacy in SAe will give access to power and status in the mainstream. This is particularly so in those policies and strategies aimed at the so-called 'equity target groups' (students of language backgrounds other than english, low-socio economic students, Indigenous students, students with disabilities, rural and isolated students, etc.) Many Indigenous Australians interpret this as *to become literate is to become educated*, but this is sometimes viewed (by others) as sacrificing all or part of their identity. Mainstream education is seen to involve the adoption of patterns of thought and study that are essentially not Indigenous. Therefore to become literate and educated is sometimes perceived to become less Indigenous. Many Indigenous people both consciously and unconsciously reject this kind of mainstream society pressure. Many of those targeted by specific literacy policies also ask (and rightly so), *Will becoming literate in english lead to employment? Will I be able to keep a job? Do I really want to work where I'll be constantly subjected to racism and prejudice....where I'll be both invisible and inaudible when it comes to things that matter?*

These are issues to be resolved if we are to achieve both education and employment equity.

Are teachers adequately prepared to teach Indigenous students?

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1989-1991) found that *school based education systems have been either unable or unwilling to accommodate many of the values, attitudes, codes and institutions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society.*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation and achievement in education, as defined by the wider Australian society, has been limited and this has in turn limited the real choices available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australian society. (1992:40)

This finding echoes earlier statements by the National Aboriginal Education Committee which, since its inception in 1976, had called for cultural understandings and relevant skills to be incorporated into teacher education. Indeed, similar statements have consistently featured in Indigenous education conference proceedings, and Aboriginal Reconciliation documents.

To demonstrate the inadequacy of teacher education, a survey of teachers undertaken in a Queensland region in 1995, comprising:

- 5 sample schools (2 high; 3 primary, one of which was situated within an Aboriginal community)
- 110 teacher responses, out of a total of 154 teachers (22% aged 29 or under. Median age group = 35-39 year olds. Average teaching experience 11.8 years.)...

... revealed that 8 out of 110 (7%) teachers indicated that they were competent and well-prepared to teach Aboriginal students; however, this competence was gained mostly from experience.

From written survey responses, teachers' comments relevant to this discussion included:

- *I treat all kids the same.*
- *I don't believe in Aboriginal English. It's just a bastardised form of the proper English that they have to learn.*
- *The kids here all speak English. Bad English of course, lazy English, but English.*
- *I ban 'language' (ie home languages) in the classroom. That's not why they are here. I also think they often use it just to make fun of me because they know I don't speak it.*

The evidence strongly suggests that teacher education includes neither the background information nor the tools for teachers to understand Indigenous students and guide them towards achievement in the years of schooling.

Yet, there are numerous writings and experienced individuals available to inform teacher education. For example, a favourite quote of mine in relation to the connection between Indigenous use of English language and teacher assumptions is the work of John Dwyer, who in 1989 reflected on his first encounter with an Indigenous student at Cherbourg many years previously:

> *'What name you call'? I turned to find my questioner was Norman, a six-year old Aboriginal boy, all smiling eyes and white teeth. 'He looks bright enough', I thought,' what a pity he can't speak properly.'*
>
> *On the basis of this snippet of speech, I had already made a judgement about Norman's language development and, probably without being aware of it, I had linked this language judgement to a further one about his general ability and intelligence.*
>
> *...If, as teachers, we see these differences as a 'problem', then our response will be to remediate and compensate, to try to stamp out and replace undesirable language. For the Aboriginal child the end result is likely to be lowered self-esteem.*
>
> *On the other hand if we see these differences as a resource on which further teaching and learning can be built, our teaching response will be to seek to extend the skills that children already have. We will see ourselves as helping*

children to further successful learning, rather than as attempting to remediate past failure. If they fail to learn, we will question our strategies rather than blame their weaknesses. We will acknowledge past successes and build in expectations of future success.

As a result the children will know their language is valued and, therefore, that they are valued. They will grow as people and as learners.

How to change...

From an exploration of successful english language acquisition programs, in the DEET publication, *Langwij comes to school,* the following steps are recommmended to teachers preparing to work with Indigenous students:

Awareness of ...

the variety of languages;
the way languages and cultures interact to develop an understanding of the world;
the way particular characteristics of language are used to define social circumstances, identity, position and power.

Acknowledgement:

Accepting the language children bring to school and using that to build competence in SAE is the key to improving the performance of Indigenous students.

Action:

Working with community (Indigenous education workers, parents, etc)
Planning
Parents/carers/community members, teachers and students must be active participants in learning negotiation.

These steps incorporate five major principles involved in teaching SAe literacy to Indigenous students, based on the research of Eagleson, Kaldor and Malcolm (1982).

1. A child's mother tongue embodies all his or her early life experiences and ingrained language habits. The mother tongue is always a cohesive linguistic system with its own grammatical/semantic properties. It allows the child to communicate, and function comfortably. It channels his or her thought processes prior to starting school.

2. School should be an extension of early childhood experience: there should not be a sharp break between the early childhood language experienced and language experienced at school.

3. Teaching is most effective when there is no conflict between home and school. Conflict can be avoided if schools respect every child's mother tongue. No language should be branded as inferior.

4. Schooling can be effective only when there is successful two-way communication between teacher and child – when the teacher and child listen to and understand one another.

5. Every Aboriginal child, as well as every other Australian child, needs to be given optimal opportunities for developing competence in Standard Australian english, which is the medium of higher education and official communication in Australia.

Finale

I would like to leave you with the following thoughts:

- *An effective education must be founded on the security and confidence engendered by an acceptance of social and cultural identity as an individual, a member of a community and as part of a nation.* (Bicentennial Australian Studies Schools Project: An Australian Curriculum Bulletin 4 p.15)

- To achieve regular school attendance by Indigenous students....*requires us to understand the needs in the classroom...to understand how they view the world...if needs are not met then they are somewhere else doing something else – being disempowered. If a school community is not committed to change, then we will never achieve this objective.* (Dr David Kemp, Federal Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, speaking on the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, 16 April 2000, Melbourne.)

- *It is poor educational practice as well as morally indefensible to make a child feel ashamed of his or her parents or friends because of the way they speak.* (Malcolm, 1982:18)

- ...and from the writer, Oodgeroo Noonuccal (also known as Kath Walker)...

Pour your pitcher of wine into the wide river
And where is your wine? There is only the river.
Must the genius of an old race die
That the race might live?
We who would be one with you, one people,
We must surrender now much that we love,
The old freedoms for new musts,
Your world for ours,
But a core is left that we must keep always.
Change and compel, slash us into shape,
But not our roots deep in the soil of old.

We are different hearts and minds
In a different body. Do not ask of us
To be deserters, to disown our mother,
To change the unchangeable.
The gum cannot be trained into an oak.
Something is gone, something surrendered, still
We will go forward and learn.
Not swamped and lost, watered away, but keeping
Our own identity, our pride of race.
Pour your pitcher of wine into the wide river
And where is your wine? There is only the river.

(*Assimilation – No!*, 1992)

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